

BOOKS IN REVIEW

The Appeal of Communism

THE GOD THAT FAILED. Edited by Richard Crossman. Harper. 273 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by GRANVILLE HICKS

MR. CROSSMAN, an editor of the *New Statesman and Nation* and a Labor MP, explains in his introduction that this symposium developed out of an argument with Arthur Koestler. "When all is said," Koestler declared, "we ex-Communists are the only people on your side who know what it's all about." He went on to describe his own state of mind when he joined the Communist party, and Crossman said, "This should be a book." "Our concern," Crossman writes, "was to study the state of mind of the Communist convert, and the atmosphere of the period—from 1917 to 1939—when conversion was so common. For this purpose it was essential that each contributor should be able not to relive the past—that is impossible—but, by an act of imaginative self-analysis, to recreate it, despite the foreknowledge of the present."

The contributors were wisely chosen, and the result is a book remarkably unified for a symposium, and one of the best studies of communism ever to have appeared. Koestler wrote the longest piece, and is properly given the center of the stage. Gide's contribution was put together by Enid Starkie out of various writings of his on communism and Russia. Richard Wright's chapter originally appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944. Ignazio Silone, Louis Fischer, and Stephen Spender seem to have written their essays specially for this volume.

HOWEVER the pieces came into existence, they fit together beautifully. As the arrangement of the book indicates, we have three party members—"The Initiates"—and three fellow-travelers—"Worshipers from Afar." (Spender was actually a member of the party for a few weeks in 1937-8, but was never what Crossman calls an "initiate.") The contributions cover virtu-

ally the entire period from the Russian Revolution to the Soviet-Nazi pact: Silone was one of the founders of the Italian Communist party, and Fischer went to the Soviet Union as a journalist in 1922; Gide and Koestler were pioneers of the leftward movement of the intelligentsia in the 30's; Wright and Spender, in their different ways, were representative figures of that movement. Furthermore, the six men illustrate three important types of Communist convert: Silone and Wright were actually identified with victims of exploitation, the former with the peasants of Central Italy, the latter with the Negroes of the United States; Fischer and Koestler were detached intellectuals, not doing badly themselves but well aware of the insecurity of their class in society; Gide and Spender belonged to privileged groups, and were moved almost exclusively, as the others were moved partly, by pity and a sense of guilt.

Koestler's and Silone's essays are quite different, but both are magnificent. Koestler's is a brilliant, bitterly humorous account of the experiences of an intellectual in the Communist party of Germany, page after page of which would serve as a description of the American party. Silone's is less informative, but deeper and more significant. Son of a *déclassé* Hungarian Jew, Koestler belonged to no one, but Silone, as all his novels have shown, belonged body and soul to the Italian peasants among whom he grew up. Their suffering was his suffering, and his passion for social justice was the expression of hopes they scarcely dared to voice. Koestler's disillusionment with communism wrecked an elaborate structure of ideas in which he had placed great confidence, but to Silone disillusionment brought pain in every fiber of his being.

None of the others was involved so deeply. Gide had a romantic love affair with a Russia conjured up out of his imagination and his generosity of spirit, and it is no wonder that he was disillusioned by his glimpse of Soviet reality. Fischer, on the other hand, carried on a prolonged flirtation, frequently shocked by

his mistress's falseness but for many years able to convince himself that, like Lady Kitty in Somerset Maugham's *The Circle*, she was faithful in spirit. Spender, too, in a rather gossipy but candid essay, speaks at length of doubts and the various ways in which they were disposed of.

Like Silone, and therefore unlike the other contributors, Richard Wright met communism on the level of everyday experience, not in the upper strata of international politics and ideological debate. And, whereas Silone was soon transposed to the upper levels and was disillusioned by what he saw and heard in the high councils of the Communist International, Wright fought his fight out on the level on which it began. It was the behavior of rank-and-file members and minor functionaries that shaped his disillusionment, and the conflict came about simply because he found that he could not be a party member and a writer—the kind of writer he wanted to be. It was a conflict that he could not understand at the time, so that he left the party with regret, saying to himself, "I'll be for them, even though they are not for me." And for some years thereafter he did work with the party, until he learned that what had seemed merely arbitrary and narrow actually expressed the boundless hatred of the free mind that permeates communism.

ALL the essays, as Crossman points out, show that communism has constantly warred upon the intellectuals, and yet they illustrate the extraordinary intellectual influence that it has had in Western Europe and the United States from the October Revolution to the present day. By no means negligible in the 20's, communism became an intellectual force—and a fad—in the 30's. No longer a fad, it remained a force in the 40's, and neither heresy-hunts nor such reasoned analyses as appear in this volume seem likely to exorcise its influence in the 50's. The Communists have included among their sympathizers a long line of men and women from John Reed to Arthur Miller, who have affected American thought and helped to make American literature. The majority have broken with communism sooner or later, but some have been broken by it, and some have maintained over years and years a strangely equivocal relationship.

What communism has offered the intellectuals can be described, as the title of this volume indicates, in religious terms. It has offered

them redemption from sin, the fellowship of true believers, and an all-inclusive theology. Redemption from sin—or, as we find it easier to say, relief from a sense of guilt—is discussed in several of these essays. Whatever their subconscious origins, the feelings of guilt seem to derive from the intellectual's awareness of the contrast between his own well-being and the woes of society. (Most of the intellectuals who turned to communism in the early 30's had not personally suffered from the depression; many of them were considerably better off than they had been in the 20's.) Guilt vanishes with the opportunity for sacrifice in the cause of human betterment, a cause to which the Marxist dialectic guarantees success. As for fellowship, or companionship, that is something that the detached intellectual always thinks he wants, though quite probably he would not know what to do with it if he had it. A few intellectuals, I think, have found actual companionship in the party, but more have found an illusion that did just as well or even better. Most party relationships are stringently impersonal, but the devout convert can easily believe that he is bound by close fraternal ties to the workers of the world.

When, on top of all this, the convert discovers Marxism, when intellectual is added to emotional satisfaction, the effect is overwhelming. "The new light seems to pour from all directions across the skull," Koestler writes; "the whole universe falls into pattern like the stray pieces of a jigsaw puzzle assembled by magic at one stroke. There is now an answer to every question, doubts and conflicts are a matter of the tortured past—a past already remote, when one had lived in dismal ignorance in the tasteless, colorless world of those who *don't know*. Nothing henceforth can disturb the convert's inner peace and certainty except the occasional fear of losing faith again. . . ."

But the god failed. Why? Most of the contributors to this volume reaffirm their belief in the ideals that they thought they were serving when they associated themselves with the party. Silone does so most eloquently: "But my faith in socialism (to which I think I can say my entire life bears testimony) has remained more alive than ever in me. In its essence it has gone back to what it was when I first revolted against the old social order: a refusal to admit the existence of destiny, an extension of the ethical impulse from the restricted individual and family sphere to the whole domain of

human activity, a need for effective brotherhood, an affirmation of the superiority of the human person over all the economic and social mechanisms which oppress him." Both Fischer and Spender emphasize their "double rejection"—of the evils of communism and the evils of capitalism.

Are we to conclude, then, that the failure was really the god's fault? The answer is yes and no. It is yes insofar as the contributors believe that the ideals of communism were corrupted and betrayed by the backwardness of Russia. This is a well-recognized and partly tenable theory, according to which it was a tragic accident that the first Communist revolution took place in a country with a low standard of living and without democratic traditions. But most of the contributors also seem to feel that their ideals, though sound as far as they went, did not go far enough. Immediately after the sentences I have quoted, Silone writes, "As the years have gone by, there has been added to this an intuition of man's dignity and a feeling of reverence for that which in man is always trying to outdistance itself, and lies at the root of his eternal disquiet." "I thought, in my Soviet phase," Fischer says, "that I was serving humanity. But it is only since then that I have really discovered the human being." One by one these men confess a faith in values they ignored while they were Communists, thus admitting that failure was not something that happened to communism from the outside but was inherent in it.

Communism asserts that good comes out of evil, and there can be no more tempting dogma in desperate times such as ours. In *All the King's Men* Willie Stark tells Dr. Stanton that good is made out of evil because that is all there is to make it out of, and Willie has only himself to believe in, not the mysteries of the dialectic. Those of us who became Communists or fellow-travelers in the 30's were acutely conscious of the ineffectualness of good will against, first, the depression, and then the power of fascism. Perhaps we accepted the evil in communism not merely because of the dialectic's assurances but also because we craved evil's strength.

What should we have done? Should we have taken an absolutist stand for the good as we knew it, clinging to that as the tides of evil mounted about us? I scarcely think so. I believe we were right in trying to fight against

evil with the best weapons we could find, even though that inevitably meant compromise with evil. What we should have remembered is that good cannot come out of evil unless there is a leaven of good in the first place, and we should have remembered that good in man is a delicate growth and will not survive if it is trampled upon. In short, we should have resisted absolutism of any kind.

It is hard to recall those days, and *The God that Failed* will render a valuable service if it brings them back to those who lived through them and gives them some sort of reality for those who did not. We ought to honor the men and women who from the outset saw the true nature of communism, but we should not assume that everyone who rejected communism was moved by sound insight and high ideals. The anti-Communist cause enlisted, as it still enlists, the cowardly, the selfish, and the ignorant. If we were worse than some, we were worse than some, we were better than others.

That is one of the things that we—"we ex-Communists . . . who know what it is all about"—have to tell our anti-Communist allies today. They err fatally if they assume that communism, even today, attracts only the worst.

"Anyone," writes Silone, "who thinks he can wean the best and most serious-minded young people away from communism by enticing them into a well-warmed hall to play billiards, starts from an extremely limited and unintelligent conception of mankind." What, then, are we to say of those who think they can destroy communism by loyalty tests and Smith acts and Feinberg laws? As the cultural conference at the Waldorf a year ago showed, the intellectual influence of communism at the

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present time cannot be lightly dismissed, and who can be sure that some combination of circumstances will not make it as powerful tomorrow as it was in the 30's? Not Stalin's communism, perhaps, but Tito's or that of some other leader who is none the less a Communist because he is Stalin's rival instead of his tool.

We should know better than most that there is no infallible inoculation against communism. Like all problems that really matter, this is a problem that can never be solved; it can only be worked on. We can work on it in many ways, but chiefly by teaching that the burdens from which we tried to escape are the inevitable burdens of the intellectual life. We cannot lay aside our burden of guilt because we are guilty and will remain so. We cannot escape from loneliness, certainly not by signing a party card and perhaps not at all. We must learn to live "in the tasteless, colorless world of those who don't know," without absolute assurances of the success of our cause.

Mr. Crossman observes that those who have been closely associated with communism are permanently affected by the experience, and of course he is right. The effects are often disturbing, sometimes revolting. But there is one vice of which ex-Communists are less likely to be guilty, and that is smugness. The restless speculations of a Koestler and the deeply moving humility of a Silone testify equally to the bitter operations of self-distrust. If communism is, as I believe, merely a symptom, merely one consequence of a crisis in human history, this self-distrust may have more than an immediate usefulness.

It is not only against communism that the future needs to be warned but also against all absolutist systems of salvation that have been or may be proposed.

The American Demagogue

PROPHETS OF DECEIT: A STUDY OF THE TECHNIQUES OF THE AMERICAN AGITATOR. By LEO LOWENTHAL and NORBERT GUTERMAN. Harper. 164 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by IRWIN ROSS

PROPHETS OF DECEIT (one of the series, "Studies in Prejudice," sponsored by the American Jewish Committee) is a useful work. Here for the first time we have a substantial study of the appeal made by the lunatic-fringe fascist to the American populace.

Analyzing the texts of speeches and printed matter, the authors shrewdly appraise the psychological meaning underlying the soapboxers' ravings. The value of the work lies in the detail of its analysis, for the sum total of revelations follows lines by now familiar to students of the subject. But here we see the specific, emotionally loaded arguments by which our tinhorn fascists exploit a psychic malaise that afflicts every stratum of society; by which they endeavor to provide outlets for aggression that both relieve the individual's tension and further exacerbate his frustration; and furnish fantasies of retribution that are socially explosive and yet have the ring of the good, old-fashioned, one-hundred-per-cent American Way.

New and particularly valuable is the detailed dissection of the main themes in the agitator's verbal arsenal—a dissection that in every case goes beyond the visible screed to lay bare its "latent content." From the tangled skein of hundreds of speeches, pamphlets, and newspaper editorials, the authors unravel twenty-one dominant themes—everything from the characterization of the followers as The Eternal Dupes to the apotheosis of the leader as Bullet-Proof Martyr.

The Eternal Dupes (the authors capitalize the themes) are hounded by Conspiracy, worldwide in scope, ancient in origin. This perpetual Conspiracy denies the Dupes the good things in life—the Forbidden Fruit—which the enemy devours with insatiable greed. The enemy himself is variously characterized as the Reds, the Plutocrats, the Corrupt Government, the Foreigner, vague and monstrous shapes which eventually coalesce into one dominant image: the Jew. In the end, the depredations of the Jewish-Plutocrat-Communist (the agitator offers

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